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AUTHOR Teitelbaum, Herta
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ABSTRACT

Reasons for the underachievement of 44 qualified college freshmen were studied. The students had above-average scores on the American College Testing program examination but earned below-average grades in their first year in college. They were invited to discuss their academic status and perceptions of college life with an academic advisor. It was found that for the majority of the respondents the main difficulty was the lack of appreciation for the demands of college-level work. Many students reported that they did not have the necessary self-discipline for independent learning and others were unable to balance their employment commitments with their academic responsibilities. The findings have clear implications for orientation and freshman advisement. Perspective students could be alerted to typical problems for freshmen that may lead to serious academic difficulties in the early semesters of a student's life in college. (Author/SW)

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FACTORS AFFECTING THE UNDERACHIEVEMENT OF ACADEMICALLY ABLE COLLEGE STUDENT

Herta Teitelbaum
Associate Dean
University College
The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM 87131

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ABSTRACT

Although there is an established positive relationship between scores students obtain on such standardized tests as the ACT or SAT and success in college, there are nevertheless large numbers of apparently well prepared high school graduates who perform poorly in their first year in college. This paper describes a project, undertaken at a public state university, which sought to identify commonly reported reasons for the underachievement of qualified freshmen. Freshmen with above-average ACT scores who earned below average grades in their first year in college were selected for the study. These students were invited to discuss their academic status and perceptions of college life with an academic advisor. It was found that for the majority of the respondents the main difficulty was the lack of appreciation for the demands of college level-work. Many students reported that they did not have the necessary self-discipline for independent learning and others were unable to balance their emloyment commitments with their academic responsibilities. The findings have clear implications for orientation and freshman advisement. Prospective students could be alerted to typical problems for freshmen which may lead to serious academic difficulties in the early semesters of a student's life in college.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE UNDERACHIEVEMENT OF ACADEMICALLY ABLE COLLEGE STUDENTS

There is ample evidence demonstrating that high school graduates with high scores on standardized tests such as the ACT or the SAT are more likely to succeed in college than students with low test scores. There are, nevertheless, large numbers of freshmen who perform quite poorly in their first year in college in spite of their high academic preparedness levels. This paper focuses on those underachievers. A review of the literature in the field of college student attrition and retention reveals that a variety of intellective as well as nonintellective factors seem to have a bearing on the likelihood that students will succeed academically. Among these variables are demographic characteristics, academic skills and motivation, student attitudes and values, and institutional factors reflecting students' involvement in the academic and nonacademic college environment. (For a comprehensive list of references see Pantages & Creedon, 1978 and Ramist, 1981.) Although this paper deals generally with underachievement rather than withdrawal specifically, it would seem that the factors that contribute to attrition will, to some extent, overlap with those that affect underachievement.

Taking into consideration the different kinds of determinants of academic failure, a pilot project was implemented at a public state university* to examine the characteristics of the underachieving freshmen and identify difficulties commonly encountered by these high ability students. Approximately 40% of the 2,400 freshmen at this university have ACT composite scores in the upper two intervals (scores ranging from 21 to 36). These students are expected to earn better than average grades in college. However, almost 30% of these freshmen finish their first year in college earning less than a "C" average (below a 2.00 on a four point scale), suggesting that factors other than ability and aptitude play a role in these students' academic performance. The objectives of this study were twofold. The primary goal was to assist students, where possible, in surmounting their problems; the secondary objective was to examine common factors leading to underachievement. Identification of such commonalities could, in turn, be used to develop intervention strategies to improve the success rate of qualified but underachieving freshmen.

METHOD

The target population for the pilot study included 192 freshmen with ACT Composite scores above 20, who reenrolled at the university for their second year but whose grade point average had fallen below a "C" average at the end of their first two semesters (fall and spring) at the university.

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*The study was carried out at The University of New Mexico which is a public Ph.D. granting institution with an approximate enrollment of 25,000 students each semester.

Letters were sent to these students inviting them to discuss their educational concerns and perceptions of campus life with an advisor. Telephone calls were made to students who did not respond within a two week period after the letters were mailed to encourage them to take advantage of the advisement service. The response rate was disappointing; about a fourth of the students (N=44) completed an interview with an advisor.

Since the pilot project was exploratory in nature, the interviews were not standardized or structured. However, common topics were raised in each interview so that some degree of comparability was assured. The interviews were conducted by six academic counselors experienced in academic advisement of freshmen. Topics discussed in these interviews included students' academic and vocational goals, reasons for their low grades in college, study habits and motivation, assessment of academic and nonacademic experience during their first year in college, degree of students' identification with the institution, and employment. The advisors were provided with an interview schedule which listed these broad areas. After completion of each interview, the advisor wrote in the interview schedule the information collected during the session.

RESULTS

Lack of academic direction has been associated with educational failure in student attrition studies (Astin, 1975; Fetters, 1977). Contrary to expectation, a relatively small proportion of the respondents in this study (20%) claimed to be undecided on an academic major. Approximately 50% of the students indicated that they intended to pursue a degree

in the engineering or science field, and the remaining 30% wanted to graduate in some other discipline such as business, the social sciences, and the humanities.

Excessive work hours, particularly jobs located off campus, are also thought to affect students' academic progress adversely (Peng & Fetters, 1977; Kohen et al., 1978; Ramist, 1981). About half of the respondents interviewed in this project were employed, generally in off campus jobs. Of the working students, almost two thirds put in more than 20 hours a week, which suggests that outside employment may have contributed to these students' poor academic performance.

When students were asked to explain their low grades, several categories of difficulties were reported with some frequency. The following tabulation summarizes these findings:

Students' explanation for high ACT scores versus low college grades	N
1. Lack of study skills (high school was easy and student did not have to work hard to obtain good grades)	19
2. Work-related problems affecting academic performances (generally too many hours of work)	9
3. Mismatch between institution and student's needs (college not necessary for chosen vocation; institution does not offer academic program of interest to students)	6
4. Student not ready for college right now (need for "time out")	6
5. Distraction (social life, fraternity/sorority)	5
6. Adjustment problems (from small town to big city; from out-of-state)	5

7.	Parental pressure/rebellion against parents	4
8.	Undecided/lack of goal/lack of motivation	3
9.	Wrong major in first semester or first year	2
10.	Personal problems (family, illness)	2
11.	Financial problems	1

Note: A number of students listed more than one reason for their under-achievement.

The most frequently mentioned difficulty was the transition from high school, where good grades generally seemed easy to come by, to college, where self-discipline and independent learning is required. These students readily admitted their lack of study and time management skills; they crammed before their mid-term and final exams but lacked the motivation and discipline for consistent and regular learning and review. That freshmen did not always fully understand the academic rigors of college life is further demonstrated by the number of students whose academic performance was seriously affected by their employment. Almost one fourth of the respondents admitted that the commitment to their job led to the deterioration of their college grades. A number of students stated that they were simply not ready for college at this stage in their lives; they enrolled because of parental pressures or because they could not think of anything else to do. In a few cases there was obviously a mismatch between the student's needs and what the university had to offer: typically where the institution did not offer a particular academic program meeting the student's academic or vocational objective. Although nine students reported that they were undecided on an academic

major, only three perceived that their lack of an educational goal had influenced their academic performance. Finally, a few respondents attributed their low grades to personal and financial difficulties.

CONCLUSION

Some suggestive information about reasons for poor performance was produced by the pilot project, despite the low response rate. Given the stated reasons for underachievement, it seems that intervention should take place earlier than reenrollment for the second year in college, and several steps have been taken in response. Publicity regarding student problems was increased through articles in the student newspaper and by alerting student personnel and faculty of the existence of the project. The assistance of student service personnel at freshman orientation was enlisted to inform prospective college students of behavior patterns that may led to academic difficulty and of strategies for successful learning. In addition, high scoring freshmen who earn low grades in their fist semester in college are now contacted as soon as semester grades are mailed, to invite these underachieving students to meet with an academic advisor and discuss their status and concerns. Research will subsequently be undertaken to determine if there is a difference in academic progress made by freshmen who respond to the advisement invitations and freshmen who do not.

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